

# Broadcasters battle for bucks while viewer goes elsewhere

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A room full of broadcasters all begging for public cash is not an edifying sight. Today some of Britain's shiniest broadcasting suits gathered at the [Royal Society](#) to debate how they should be funded after the analogue switch-off in 2012.

I don't doubt their commitment to public service broadcasting. I have no objection to subsidies. My broadcast career would have been a lot less interesting and less well-rewarded if the BBC and Channel 4 News had not benefitted from regulated subsidies. But the panic has now set in amongst the big boys of broadcasting and the scramble for safety does not look pretty.

I think that free-market media advocate [Martin Le Jeune](#) is right that the [Ofcom PSB review](#) feels pre-ordained. We will see about £150 million from somewhere heading towards Channel 4. The BBC licence fee will remain largely untouched. There will be support for children's programming and domestic production. This will get us through the next five years or so, but it ignores the fundamental shift in the idea of public value. Indeed, it ignores the fundamental shift in what we mean by broadcasting.

Ofcom's Peter Philips said he was surprised at the 'resilience' of mainstream TV. Indeed, he seemed quite calm about what [Andy Duncan](#) from Channel 4 and [Carolyn Fairburn](#) from ITV described as an immediate crisis. Channel 4 is already slashing budgets and ITV made it clear that it wants guarantees now or it will continue to dump public service elements such as regional news.

But there are larger forces at work. Convergence means that newspapers could already claim to be public service broadcasters. The audience has already taken its attention elsewhere for much of what used to be a monopoly for public sector broadcasters.

This was neatly exemplified by the excellent Tim Sparkes of [joiningthedots.tv](#). He railed against the way that the main broadcasters use a few public service programmes as a fig leaf to claim moral cover for a whole slew of dross. The BBC cites David Attenborough when most of its output is dancing on ice competitions. Channel 4 is proud of its news show but what about Big Brother?

And so Tim has created an online website for 'nutritious' documentaries that can't get a mainstream airing. Well isn't that the point? We don't need mainstream media anymore. If they want to ignore a premium niche audiences then sod them, we're off. Well, sort of.

There is still too much public value in the mainstream broadcasting institutions. For real plurality we need institutions that can compete with the BBC and keep it honest. So for now, I think it is right that we work harder to think of clever ways to support public value at ITV, Five, and Channel 4 .

I would like to see ideas like the Sarkozy levy on hardware considered more seriously. How about a tax on Google search? (only kidding). But I agree with one person who spoke from the floor. They suggested that the old institutions don't usually survive revolutions. It takes new organisations (like Google) to take advantage of seismic shifts.

Polis is holding a meeting to debate the PSB review with Ofcom's Stewart Purvis and Patrick Barwise from the London Business School on June 3rd at 6.30pm with drinks. Email [polis@lse.ac.uk](mailto:polis@lse.ac.uk) to reserve a place.

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